DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 279 UD 018 572

AUTHOR	Moore, David Thornton
TITLE	Alternative Schools: A Review. Urban Diversity Series, No. 53.
INSTITUTION	Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. ERIC Clearinghouse on the Urban Disadvantaged.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Jun 78
CONTRACT	400-77-0071
NOTE	31p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York 10027 ($2.50)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Alternative Schools; Case Studies (Education); Curriculum Design; *Educational Alternatives; Educational Anthropology; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Needs; *Experimental Schools; *Program Evaluation; *Research Needs; Research Reviews (Publications); State of the Art Reviews
IDENTIFIERS	Ethnography

ABSTRACT

This paper defines alternative schools, exploring such critical parameters as their organizational context and structure, their curricular focus and pedagogical approach, and their governance. Also reviewed are some of the studies of experimental schools. Prior research is placed in the context of a critique which argues that more detailed information is needed about the quality of everyday life in the programs rather than on traditional evaluative measures of outcomes. The paper has two stated purposes: first, to dispel some of the popular misconceptions about alternative schools by describing various programs and practices that use that term; and second, to impose some conceptual order on the large number of alternatives through a review of some of the dimensions along which these schools vary. The data on alternative schools were gathered through the author's personal experience and through a review of the literature. It is suggested that more ethnographic research be conducted on alternative schools. (Author/AM)

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ED159279

ERIC/CUE URBAN DIVERSITY SERIES

Number 53, June 1978

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS:

A REVIEW

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The material in this publication was prepared pursuant to a contract with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such projects under Government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to the Compensatory Education Task Force of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education, New York, New York for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either the Compensatory Education Task Force or the National Institute of Education.

During the early years of this decade, the debate on the value and effect of alternative education raged in many school districts. Since that time, the rhetoric has cooled somewhat: Schools have survived and been accepted, or have died out. Here and there a new controversy flares up centering on funding cuts for one school or a startling proposal for another, but by and large, public attention has waned. Yet many of the stereotypes and misconceptions which gave energy to the early disputes live on. People only peripherally connected to education either know nothing at all about what "alternative school" means or cling to some peculiar image of barefooted hippies or roving street gangs. What discussion there is of options in public education--a term popularized by Mario Fantini (1974, 1976)--often betrays an ignorance of what is currently known about alternative schools.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to dispel some of the popular misconceptions about alternative schools by describing various programs and practices that use that term; and second, to impose some conceptual order on the melange of alternatives, reviewing some of the dimensions along which such schools vary. Perhaps the most solid argument of this paper--though certainly not the most enlightening or helpful--is this: No single definition of alternative schools can accommodate all the programs which go by that name. Generalizations about any aspect of alternative schools --the characteristics of students and teachers, achievement and attendance rates, funding, structure, curriculum--must ignore the vastly contradictory data available. My plan, therefore, is to suggest several sets of options open to people who would design or analyze alternative schools, that is, to confront the question, "What do different people mean when they use the term alternative school?" In addition, I will review some of the studies of experimental schools, placing prior research in the context of a critique which argues that we need richer and more detailed information about the quality of everyday life in new programs. I will suggest that many studies use the wrong measures to document and evaluate alternative schools, and that more work of an ethnographic sort must be done before we can say we comprehend educational innovation.

A caveat regarding the nature of the data utilized in this paper: My information comes from two types of sources, neither entirely reliable. The first source is my own experience. I taught in one alternative school in Philadelphia for over two years; I did an intensive study of another in Boston over the course of a school year; and I have visited perhaps a dozen others. The second and far more

broad-based source of information, then, is the body of literature generated over the last decade by members of alternative schools, by various scholars, by observers from the popular press, and by one or another government agency. Some of that literature is in my judgment accurate, sound, and useful. Much of it, I will argue, is at best questionable. In this paper, I will describe alternative schools as I believe them to be; I will also critique some of the available writings. The degree to which my versions of phenomenal reality reflects the "truth" is a question I cannot answer.

WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL?

Numbers alone make impossible a single description of alternative schools. No survey has ever adequately identified all experimental school programs in the United States, although several have made valiant attempts (cf. Wolf, Walker, and Mackin, 1974; Barr, 1975; Harch, 1974; Flaxman and Homstead, 1978; Graubard, 1971). The problem lies both in the arbitrary quality of the definition--one survey (Harch, 1974) listed the Miquon Upper School in Philadelphia, but excluded the Miquon Lower School--and in the tremendous difficulty in simply locating all of the programs. In 1973, the International Consortium on Options in Public Education (ICOPE) found 464 public alternatives in thirty-five states; in 1975, it estimated that there would be as many as 5,000 (Barr, 1975). Finding the "free schools"--the term used for most nonpublic alternatives --is even more troublesome, particularly given their relatively short life spans. What is clear is this: Within the last ten years, hundreds and probably thousands of new programs defined by their designers as in some way alternative have been created inside and outside public school systems. Hundreds of them survive (Flaxman and Homstead, 1978).

But what are these schools? How are they organized? Who are their students, their teachers? What do people do in them? Alternative schools vary along a number of dimensions. People who design innovative programs must decide on a wide range of issues. Sometimes, one decision tends to follow another--for instance, free schools, by virtue of their funding sources and governance structures, are generally small--but many of the choices may be made independently. As a result, the schools and programs cannot be placed into a unidimensional typology. Some of the critical parameters are described below.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE

One very clear decision facing school developers is whether or not to stay within the public system. The choice carries profound consequences for the nature of the school population, funding, staffing, stability, curriculum: all of these may vary depending on whether or not the school is operated by a local Board of Education. Which option is selected depends, of course, on the people who are making it. Many of the free schools documented by Graubard (1972) were created by people who

were buoyed by the radical spirit of the times and were convinced that the public school bureaucracies would inevitably crush their innovations. Other reformers, concerned perhaps about the vast majority of students who would necessarily stay in the public system, and wary of the endless struggle free schools face in securing funds, chose to work within official channels. I have discovered no pattern in the backgrounds or politics or temperaments of those who made the different decisions: Some public school teachers left their jobs to found new schools, while some radicals decided to become public school teachers and spark change from within. One way or another, the choice had great importance.

The origins of a school could shape its future profoundly as well. The Alternative Schools Project in suburban Philadelphia was initiated by administrators, while many of the magnet school programs in Boston were organized by teachers. Students themselves participated in founding some schools (cf. Elizabeth Street Cleaners School, 1972), and parent or community groups began others. Again, no systematic study has been done to compare schools started by different types of people, but the source of the initial conception and momentum must make a difference.

The organizational format or structure of alternative schools varies along at least one crucial dimension: the degree to which the program is embedded in the context of the traditional schools. Free schools, which are by definition independent of the public school system, enter the typology several steps along, roughly where independent public alternatives are; the degree of similarity between free and independent alternative schools is an empirical issue which must be confronted on a case-by-case level. In the following paragraphs, I will describe several structural options for alternative programs varying in their autonomy from the traditional schools.

Classroom-based Programs. In terms of numbers, perhaps the most common form of innovation exists in isolated classrooms in otherwise conventional schools. Within the confines of his or her own room, a teacher may experiment with ideas ranging from the British infant school model (cf. Silberman, 1970) to the microsociety idea proposed by Richmond (1973). While teachers attempting such innovations generally need the support (or at least noninterference) of their principals, they may be completely independent of other instructors in the school. Some members of Philadelphia's former Affective Education Program, for instance, were the only teachers in their schools using the new curriculum; their support came instead from the central program office and faculty members in other schools. The Open Corridor Project, initiated in New York's Upper West Side by Lillian Weber, also worked with individual teachers but tried to develop support networks within schools. Still, the essential reform affected the classroom and perhaps its neighbors. What distinguishes this form of innovation is that it is classroom-based and does not necessarily alter the functioning of the rest of the school. At the

high school level, for instance, a student may participate in an experimental social studies class--one, say, which uses oral history methods to study a town's black community--and spend the rest of the day in conventional English, science, and math classes.

Schools-Within-Schools. Slightly more distinct from the regular schools are programs variously called schools-within-a school, minischools, or magnet programs. In essence, such a project establishes within the organizational and physical context of the larger school a subunit within which a student may spend some or all of the day. The degree of autonomy may vary: Some schools-within-schools remove a group of teachers and students entirely from the standard round of classes and activities and leave them to enact a wholly different school program; others keep the program members together for only part of the day and expect them to participate in conventional classes the rest of the time (cf. Liebrader, 1977; Wharton, 1975; Balsam, 1976).

Schools-within-schools are created for various administrative and pedagogical reasons. One significant function of the magnet schools in Boston and other cities is to attract students from different areas to a special program, thereby improving the racial balance of the student body. Rather than reassign students solely on the basis of race, the idea here is to encourage parents and children voluntarily to choose to enroll in other schools because of certain educational options. Other programs may be invented to accommodate specific groups, such as pregnant teenage women; a mini-school of this type was attached to Gratz High School in Philadelphia.

Independent Alternative Schools. In many cities, entire schools are designed as alternatives to the conventional model. Some, like Philadelphia's famous Parkway Program, New York's City-as-School, and Boston's LAB School, are newly created, established specifically as alternatives. Others, like four different elementary schools in the Southeast Alternatives system in Minneapolis, were traditional schools revamped to try new methods. Independent schools are occasionally affiliated with regular schools: The School for Human Services in Philadelphia was known as an "annex" of John Bartram High Schools. In that case, students may come only from the home school, may take courses in the home school, if necessary (many do enroll in science and math courses at conventional schools, since alternatives are often weak in those areas), and they receive their diplomas from the home school. Other schools are truly independent: off-site, with their own principals, autonomous staff, and diploma-granting powers. If they choose, as all public schools and many free schools do, to offer state-accredited diplomas, the schools must satisfy certain local and state requirements; but the independent alternatives manage to develop a wide range of ways of creating new definitions for school (cf. Bremer and von Moschzisker, 1971; Simon, 1973; Moore, 1978).

Alternative Systems. A few districts in the country have instituted

full-blown alternative school systems, offering an array of educational options at every grade level. Some of these, such as Berkeley, California, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, were instigated by the United States Office of Education and later supported by the National Institute of Education (NIE) under the Experimental Schools Project. In order to create "comprehensive change" in these systems, NIE funded elementary, intermediate, and secondary alternative programs and encouraged coordination of the projects so that students theoretically could progress through their entire school careers within the alternative system. At its height, the Berkeley Experimental Schools Project (BESP) reached up to 30 percent of the school population in twenty-three separate sites ranging from independent schools to modified classrooms. Results overall were disappointing, however. According to an evaluation report, only seven of the twenty-three programs survived the end of NIE funding of BESP, and five of those seven antedated BESP itself (Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1976:3). Southeast Alternatives in Minneapolis--incidentally one of the most thoroughly researched sets of alternative schools in the country--seems to be in better shape (cf. Nelson et al., 1975).

Alternative school programs assume many different organizational forms, then, both inside and outside the public education system. With varying degrees of autonomy from the conventional schools, the experimental projects may be modified classrooms, schools-within-schools, independent alternatives, or entire systems. Much more remains to be said about the people who participate in the schools and what they do together.

Membership: Students and Teachers. Alternative schools are created by and for many different kinds of people. One dimension along which schools might be analyzed is the degree of universality or specificity of their student populations. On one end of the spectrum are those schools designed for any and all students. They often use self-selection or lottery procedures for admissions: Either a student chooses to apply for admission to the school and is automatically enrolled, or applicants' names are chosen at random. The distinction is whether or not the program is oversubscribed. At the other end of the spectrum are programs designed for narrowly defined groups of students, such as adolescent mothers or members of a gang. Even those schools differ in the extent to which students have a choice about attending. Many critics argue that programs in which students are forced to enroll--by court order, guidance referral, or test result--are not in fact alternative schools regardless of format or atmosphere.

No generalization can describe the students who attend alternative schools. Academic aptitude varies enormously not only between schools, but often within schools. Students in the school where I taught in Philadelphia (roughly 175) scored from the ninety-ninth to to the first percentile on virtually every subtest of the Stanford

Achievement Tests (Gibboney and Langsdorf, 1972). There are, however, schools designed exclusively for students with academic problems; even those may be for either low-aptitude or under-achieving students.

Many schools--seemingly more and more, in fact--cater to students who for one reason or another have trouble meeting the demands of a conventional school. This issue is tricky and difficult: To what extent are such programs created to serve the needs of individual students, and to what extent are they designed to remove troublesome kids from the regular schools? The rhetoric of most programs, at least, sounds supportive rather than punitive. The School of Survival (SOS) in Minneapolis lists some criteria which qualify a student for admission: poor academic skills, low tolerance for large group situations, short attention span, irregular attendance, an inability to meet regular time requirements, poor authority relationships, low motivation, poor social interaction skills, and others. A skeptic could easily rephrase those traits as laziness, trouble-making, antisocial behavior, and talking back to teachers. But the tone of the rest of the program description suggests that staff members are genuinely concerned to help students rather than to keep them in line (Wharton, 1975). Such programs must be judged on their individual merits. Inputing control motives to administrators without assessing their practices is unfair.

Racial and ethnic composition of alternative schools tends to reflect student populations as a whole. According to the survey conducted by the National Alternative Schools Program in 1974, roughly two-thirds of the students attending alternative schools in the United States are white, one-quarter are black, and the rest represent other minority groups; these figures are statistically similar to overall numbers (Wolf, Walker and Mackin, 1974). More will be said about the issue of student diversity later in the paper.

As is true of students, no easy generalization accommodates the people who teach in alternative schools. The stereotype of eight or ten years ago--young, radical, upper-middle class, bearded, dungareed--no longer obtains, if it ever did. Wenokur (1976) surveyed teachers in independent alternatives, schools-within-schools (SWS), and regular schools in New York City, and found that distinctions among them were rather subtle. Faculty members in independent alternatives tended to be slightly younger than those in the other two types of schools (a majority were under thirty); they were also less likely to be married and had less experience in teaching and in graduate study. In addition to demographics, Wenokur examined such attitudes as Task Orientation, Occupational Expectations, and Professional-Bureaucratic Orientation. He found the three groups roughly matched in Task Orientation (commitment to students over school); SWS teachers were slightly more professionally oriented than those in the other types, and they also showed the highest "internal" orientation (teachers in regular schools were the most "externally" oriented). Most significantly, the survey demonstrated that the differences among the three groups were not so drastic as to suggest that various types of schools attract different personality types as teachers. That is not to

say that the jobs or the schools are identical, but rather that the people who choose to take them on are not radically different.

What is clear from the literature on schools across the country, then, is that they serve an enormous variety of students: all classes, races, religions, academic backgrounds, aptitudes, and interest. Teachers vary less, but widely still.

CURRICULAR FOCUS AND PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

The alert reader will hardly be surprised to hear that no simple generalizations can characterize the range of curricula and pedagogical strategies employed in alternative schools. Curriculum and teaching-learning styles do not vary along a single dimension, and many schools display an eclectic spirit as well, mixing their choices. With the caveat that the types overlap and that some programs defy typing altogether, I suggest that most schools utilize one or more of the following curriculum models.

Smorgasbord. A school may offer a dizzying array of courses (also called learning experiences, modules, packages, seminars, workshops) with no clear organizing principle beyond credit demands. The course catalogs of alternative schools make fascinating and often amusing reading. Except for the requirement that they satisfy distribution regulations--covering English, social studies, math, science, and some others--students pick virtually at will from among such courses as: Fix It Yourself; Geodesic Domes; The American Character; Rock 'n Roll in the Fifties'; Everyday Math; Ecology; Critical Thinking and Expository Writing; Cycling; SAT Math; Community Studies; Writing a Newspaper. The list could go on endlessly, limited only by imagination and nerve.

Many of the courses in such a format cross disciplinary boundaries. One which I co-taught was called Men and Women, and examined sex roles and behavior from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, history, physiology, literature, and art. Teachers from all those fields collaborated in designing and implementing the syllabus. Some other courses may be more narrow in focus. SAT Math, a listing in more than a few alternative school catalogs, trains students specifically for the college boards. Enthusiasm for the "far-out" courses of the early seventies--Who Am I? Batiking, Beyond the Looking Glass --appears to have waned somewhat in this back-to-basics era, but some titles still sound bizarre. The essence of the smorgasbord model of curriculum development survives in many schools, though, and provides the student with a tremendous variety of courses.

Themes. Some schools organize their entire curriculum around one or two themes, issues, or areas of inquiry which can be approached from a number of perspectives. Students at the LAB School of Boston, during the first semester of the 1976-77 year, chose either Life Cycles

(the study of human development from prebirth to postdeath) or Environmental Discovery (the study of the city as a built environment). Each group spent the bulk of its time investigating one or another aspect of its central question: visiting neighborhoods and architects, building a childrens' playground, or drawing maps in Environmental Discovery; seeing films on childbirth, working in nursing homes, or interviewing social workers and psychiatrists in Life Cycles. English, history, and even some science were woven into the overall plan (Moore, 1977). The Lower Kensington Environmental Center in Philadelphia, while requiring work in basic skills and other academics, focused much of its curriulum on the study of urban ecology (School District of Philadelphia, 1977. Magnet schools, as mentioned above, attract students from many neighborhoods by offering special programs in such fields as aviation, agriculture, and bilingual studies.

Schools Without Walls. These programs, of which the Parkway Program in Philadelphia is perhaps the paradigm, use the city as a classroom. Students schedule their learning in a variety of public and private institutions, ranging from museums to banks to prisons. While these forms are normally subsets of the organizational type called independent alternatives, they are sometimes found in regular schools. In effect, they are at least as much a curricular and pedagogical innovation as an experiment in structure. The very idea that students can learn from resources outside the school, that "external learning" is valid and accountable, speaks to the most basic questions regarding the nature of education in an urban society.

The form which external learning assumes varies from program to program, from student to student. In some cases, it may mean holding an algebra class in a bank; while the physical setting is changed, the substance of the algebra lesson may be the same. In other cases, it may mean that a student serves as an apprentice to a sculptor, learning the technical and aesthetic secrets of that art; or it may mean that several students write articles for a community newspaper, interviewing local residents about neighborhood issues and conditions; or it may mean a student takes a course in anthropology at a nearby college. City-as-School, an external learning program based in Brooklyn, last year published a thirty-seven page catalog with literally hundreds of such options for its 350 students. Each of the "learning experiences" had been carefully developed by resource coordinators in cooperation with people at the learning sites (cf. City-as-School, 1977).

Basic Skills. Many school districts offer alternative programs which focus on basic skill development. The problem with identifying them as a distinct type of alternative curriculum is the implicit suggestion that neither conventional schools nor other alternatives concentrate on such matters as learning to read and write. That is clearly not the case. The National Alternative Schools Program (NASP) at the University of Massachusetts discovered in a national survey that 75 percent of the experimental schools responding listed basic skills as a major program emphasis, many as a primary goal (Wolf, Walker, and

Mackin, 1974). What may distinguish these programs from traditional schools is the approach to basic skills: There may be more individualized instruction, more varied materials available for each student, more time spent on skills. Some alternative schools center their entire curriculum on basic skills; the Council on Basic Education found at least nineteen districts with what they called "fundamental schools," and seven more preparing to start such programs (Broad, 1977: 41). This form of alternative swings away from the "barefooted hippie" image back toward the traditional teacher-centered, highly organized, disciplined efforts to teach students the basic reading, writing, and computation skills. Philadelphia's Fitler Elementary, for instance, instituted a program called Academics Plus and stressed hard-nosed skill development.

Another kind of alternative school which focuses on skills is called the "continuation school." Designed for dropouts, returnees, teenage parents, drug abusers, and gang members, these schools attempt to help students complete their education who otherwise would not (Broad, 1977:22). Their services aim at two related goals: building basic skills so that students can function adequately outside of school; and dealing with immediate problems of drugs, child care, employment, violence, and the law. Counseling, therefore, constitutes a large part of the program. If basic skills include survival methods, then these schools clearly fit this curriculum model.

Career Education. Another curricular thrust supported by NIE is career education, particulary in the form of Experience Based Career Education (EBCE). Several educational laboratories around the country have contracted with NIE to develop EBCE programs and to test their effects. In one Appalachia project, for instance, juniors and seniors may spend up to 80 percent of their school time at work sites for one to thirteen weeks. The goal is to expose students to work experience so that they will be able to make more reasoned judgments about their own careers (cf. Johnson, n.d.; Bucknam, 1976; Shively and Sanders, 1976).

Pedagogical strategies outnumber curricular forms and are even more difficult to distinguish. Options range from highly structured, teacher-directed, even programmed instruction methods for teaching reading, writing, and math to relatively formless, collaborative investigations and activities. Most alternative school teachers tend to use somewhat informal styles of interaction with students: They may dress more casually than conventional teachers, may insist that students call them by their first names, may invoke fewer behavioral rules in classrooms. Students I have interviewed frequently mention the easier relations with teachers as a favored feature of their schools. Still, teachers often take the primary responsibility for designing and supplying material for courses. Students, I have found (Moore, 1977), expect and want their instructors to assume that role.

Discussion is a favorite method in alternative classrooms. Students enjoy expressing their ideas and feelings on subjects ranging from the Vietnam War to Billy Budd. Curiously, lecturing happens more than one might imagine, but open talk is far more common. Films, guest speakers, simulation games, frequent field trips: these and many other strategies are used. How different these methods are from conventional school classes remains to be studied more; certainly on the surface, many alternative school techniques will sound familiar to regular teachers (cf. Verner and Conley, 1976; Barrett-Goldfarb, 1977). Testing may be rarer in alternative schools--teachers frequently require final papers or projects instead of examinations--and competition may be played down, since the goal is to help each student experience success in learning.

Group study is often encouraged. Students may collaborate on preparing a report for presentation to the rest of the class. Many alternative school teachers emphasize what they call "experiential learning": They get their students engaged in activities both inside and outside the classroom through which they can learn facts, skills, and attitudes. The focus on affective learning constitutes both a curricular and a pedagogical reform. Exploration of community settings--government institutions, neighborhoods, museums, and so on--provides a basis for focused work in history, literature, sociology, and other fields. The range of pedagogical strategies in use in alternative schools, then, defies typing. No single strategy revolutionizes teaching, but the flexibility of the options may be new in American education.

GOVERNANCE

Many alternative schools, in addition to serving the needs of a variety of students using a variety of curricular and pedagogical approaches, attempt reforms in the decision-making procedures shaping policy and program. The essential dimension in the analysis of governance in new schools is the degree to which constituencies normally excluded--students, teachers, parents, even community people --may take part. Once again, different schools opt for very different forms.

Most early free schools, encouraged by the model of Summerhill (Neill, 1960), practiced a nearly total democracy: Everyone connected with the school, from teachers and cooks to small children, had an equal vote on any question. Public alternatives modified that principle: Elementary school children were less likely to take part in decision making; and administrative regulations, such as hiring and firing procedures or bans on drugs and alcohol on campus, were more often imposed from above. Still, a vast spectrum of decisions, from course design and cut policy to planning for trips and graduations, were left to the whole school community. Most typically, decision

making was to take place in the congregation variously called "town meeting," "all-school meeting," or "student-staff meeting." All members of the student body and faculty were expected to attend and to particpate in deliberations on such issues as smoking in class and grade policies. In reality, many students absented themselves from these plenary sessions, sparking heated charges of apathy and woeful predictions of the collapse of democracy.

At the other end of the scale, many alternative schools make no pretense of opening up their governance structures. At the LAB School in Boston, for instance, students enroll for only one semester (with some extensions), and are presented with already-made decisions about courses and rules. The administrator argued that including the students in basic policy formulation would confuse them and immobilize the school unnecessarily (Moore, 1977). However, while the staff and administration decided such basic issues as course offerings, credit, and attendance requirements, students did take part in formulating many other day-to-day policies, from details of the curriculum to plans for school trips. That fact raises an important distinction in the understanding of governance in alternative schools, a distinction which speaks to the breast-beating about student apathy: It is between formal and informal decision making. Even in those schools which do not place students on official policy boards, students often make decisions significant in their day-to-day lives. Students in Philadelphia told me that even though they chose not to attend the town meeting, they felt empowered, able to make decisions about where to go and what to do between classes, about selecting courses from a considerable range of options, and about telling their teachers what they did and did not like about their classes. Formal decision making was to them boring and pointless. Moreover, they felt incapable of expressing their opinions as forcefully and articulately as teachers could at all-school meetings. Thus, they were content to leave formal policies to the staff and to continue shaping their everyday lives (Moore, 1974).

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM RESEARCH ON ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS?

All these descriptions make implicit claims about the "objective reality" of alternative schools. Obviously, many putative facts are open to challenge; others raise far more questions than they answer. In this section, I will try to identify what we "know" about alternative schools based on careful study. What quickly becomes apparent is that we do not know very much. While many of the new programs undergo regular and seemingly exhaustive--certainly exhausting--evaluation, the information generated by those procedures is often sketchy and difficult to compare. Moreover, much of it fails to speak to crucial questions about the nature of everyday life or the texture of people's experiences in the schools. Many, if not most studies on alternative schools focus on traditional evaluative measures of outcomes: reading and math scores, drop-out

rates, attendance figures, demographic characteristics of students or teachers. Some studies which claim to address quality of life issues rely on survey questionnaire methods, with little actual observation of schools (cf. Wolf, Walker, and Mackin, 1974).

Both kinds of studies--tests and surveys--are of questionable value. One must question their validity and reliability, that is, for a variety of reasons. First, conditions under which tests are administered are often not controlled adequately to yield reliable results. I witnessed the Stanford Achievement Tests being given to a large group of students spread haphazardly around an open space, some literally sitting in each other's laps. Second and more telling, the value orientations of many alternative school people make them less than cooperative subjects: They consider such tests unfair and irrelevant as measures of their school performance, and they take the tests less than seriously. I have no way of determining the degree to which these observations affect test reliability, but I submit that the test-givers do not either.

Another sort of problem plagues the survey method: the variable interpretations of the terms selected to identify participants' attitudes and experiences. Researchers often pose questions in terms which fail to speak to members' own constructions of their school lives. An example from the school where I taught: One survey attempted to measure the extent of student participation in decision making by asking them to specify the number of hours per week they spent in activities such as town meetings and committees. The response, predictably, suggested low involvement (Gibboney and Langsdorf, 1972). But as I have noted, students reported in conversations that they felt themselves to be empowered in making important decisions about their everyday lives. The survey failed to tap that sentiment.

Conventional tests and measures, then, must be approached with a healthy skepticism. That is not to say that they are useless. Reading and math gains are clearly significant in the evaluation of any educational program, and tests are one way of determining achievement. Measures claiming to reveal attitudes and behaviors, however, must be shown first to do what they say they do, and second to be reliable in a population which doubts their validity. More to the point, one must ask what aspects of alternative school life are entirely overlooked by these measures.

TRADITIONAL MEASURES

Caveats aside, what can these conventional tests and measures tell us about the characteristics, performance, behavior, and attitudes of alternative school members? What conclusions can we draw about the learning environment or climate within the schools?

Achievement and Attendance. Most evaluations of alternative schools,

if they share nothing else in common, report two figures: relative gains in reading and math scores, and relative attendance rates. Two eminently reasonable premises underlie those measures: first, that students in alternative schools ought to learn to read, write, and compute at least as well as students in traditional programs; and second, that students ought to be attending school at least as regularly as they did when they were enrolled in conventional schools. Alternative school advocates sometimes claim their students improve markedly in both areas. Critics have argued that the lack of rigor and discipline inhibits academic progress and may even encourage erratic attendance (cf. Broudy, 1973). Where is the truth?

Predictably, the truth defies easy description. On the achievement side, results have been mixed but largely favorable. In all the schools listed below, and in hundreds more, students made at least the expected gains in reading and math scores: the Open School Alternative in Edina, Minnesota (Stiggins, 1974); the School-within-a-School at Hilo High in Hawaii (Nagoshi, 1970); the Southeast Community Education Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Erickson, 1975); the Edison Project (Lipton, 1977a); Alternative East (Wroblewski, 1977); and the Girard Alternative Music Program (Lipton, 1977b) in Philadelphia; and the Lower East Side Prep in New York (Seidman, 1971). Some schools fare less well. At the School for Human Services in Philadelphia, forty-seven students attained or exceeded expected growth between 1975-1976 and 1976-1977, but seventy did not (Vincenzi, 1977a). Similarly, the city's Sunnycrest program showed more students falling behind than moving ahead (Vincenzi, 1977b). Dr. Seth Wohl, who has done extensive evaluation and research in alternative schools in New York City, suggests in a comprehensive review that reading and math skills continue to be a problem for students in experimental programs (Wohl, 1974).

Given the enormous range of students and pedagogical strategies in alternative schools around the country, the hard (if fragmentary) statistics on achievement suggest one conclusion: The schools are neither the learning revolutions promised by some supporters nor the academic disasters predicted by some critics. Scores vary somewhat from school to school (as, certainly, from student to student within schools), but this generalization appears warranted: By and large, students in alternative schools acquire basic reading and computation skills at least as well as those in more conventional programs. By all traditional measures, attendance at an alternative program does not retard a student's academic growth, and for some, achievement improves. For the thousands of students who might otherwise drop out of school altogether, any gain at all might be seen as a success.

In terms of attendance, statistics again suggest that most students perform as well as they did in traditional schools. Of course, that is not inevitably the case. Wohl (1974) notes that while four of the ten independent alternative high schools in New York had attendance rates better than the city-wide average, six did not; he points out that the schools with better attendance tended to be those with

strong external learning components and/or a regular accountability system. In Berkeley's Experimental Schools Program, researchers found no significant differences in rates of either truancy or dropouts between regular and alternative programs (Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1976). Many other schools, however, found that individual students did tend to improve their attendance records (cf. Nelsen, 1975; Sulack, 1975; Johnston and Parker, 1975).

Two caveats on the interpretation of attendance figures: First, there is no way of knowing how many students who are enrolled in alternative schools might have become dropouts had that option not been available. More than a few students I have interviewed asserted that they would not have gone back to their old schools. One sophomore, being chastised by his teacher for having missed six days in the first term, replied, "You've got to realize that I cut 135 days last year!" But since adequate control groups cannot be found for studies, claims about improved attendance and dropping out must remain speculative. Second, while knowing whether a given student would be truant more often in different circumstances is nearly impossible, knowing what that truancy means to the student (boredom, fear of failure or punishment, alienation, availability of better things to do, conflicts with authorities or peers) is even harder. Moreover, attendance figures say nothing at all about the quality of the student's experiences on the occasions when he or she does attend. A student in an alternative school may for some reason stay away from school as much or more than he/she did from traditional school, but it is at least conceivable that the student learns more when he/she manages to come. Attendance figures alone can never answer that question.

Behavior and Attitude. A number of studies use various survey methods to identify behaviors and attitudes of alternative school members. The evaluation design for many of the alternative programs in Philadelphia for 1977 called for measures of behavior problems as reflected in performance ratings. The results were mixed. At Sunnycrest, in a program for "male students characterized as disruptive, truant and/or alienated from the traditional school system," fully 48 percent showed improved behavior ratings, and only 3 percent were worse than before (Vincenzi, 1977b); but at the School for Human Services, there was a 17 percent increase in the number of unsatisfactory performance ratings (Vincenzi, 1977a). The report offers no interpretation of the figures.

Without extensive supporting observation, in fact, interpretation of behavior statistics must be speculative. In the school where I taught, many "behavior problems" were simply defined out of existence. Chewing gum in class, walking barefoot, wearing a hat indoors, and swearing produced no confrontations between authority figures and students. Even potentially "disruptive" behavior resulted more often in discussion of problems and solutions than in punishment. The descriptive literature on other alternative schools indicates that this approach

is common. Camparative statistics on behavior must account for these differences in definition.

Attitude surveys appear frequently in studies of alternative schools. Students are often asked to rate their courses, teachers, and schools on a number of dimensions. The results tend to be positive: Students seem to "like" their schools. Johnson (1975) found that pupils in three private free schools in Minneapolis saw their programs as relevant, their teachers as friendly and fair, and their cognitive and affective learning as satisfactory. Walizer (1975) examined both "hard" data on achievement and attendance and "soft" data on questionnaire responses, and concluded that students and teachers at the Sweet Street Academy in Grand Rapids liked their program in similar ways. Gibboney and Langsdorf (1972) asked students to rate their own learning in addition to the quality of their teachers and courses, and discovered that most believed they were learning well, that their teachers were responsive and skillful, and that the school provided a useful alternative to traditional models. Almen (1974) sought the opinions of parents of students in the Southeast Alternatives in Minneapolis; they tended to approve of the programs overall, believed their children were learning adequately, and were interested in participating in school affairs, but had mixed feelings about the testing program and the school's approach to minority children. Students in Berkeley's Experimental Schools Project seemed to be more sensitized to racism and saw fewer overt racist acts in the new program than they had in conventional schools; on measures of anomie and self-concept, however, they were not radically different from the standard student population of the district (Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1976).

In addition to ratings of self, staff, or school, questionnaires have been used to try to identify attitudinal and behavioral features of student groups. Gaite and Rankin (1974), for instance, compared a group of alternative school students and a control group from a traditional high school in order to determine what kinds of people are attracted to experimental settings. Their standards for comparison included intelligence test scores, tests of mental maturity, achievement scores, and grades; they also used a questionnaire to measure study attitudes and habits. They claimed that alternative school students tended to have lower IQ's and achievement scores, and to show higher approval of their teachers. Willard and Glick (1975) applied the Delphi Technique to a school in New York City to determine the congruence and clarity of goals held by various members. Despite fragmentary returns, they asserted that lack of agreement on basic goal issues divided school constituencies.

Once more, I must reiterate my skepticism regarding these survey data. As both teacher and researcher, I have seen participants' "attitudes" fluctuate wildly over time. Students have told me that they were reluctant to jeopardize support for their schools by checking off negative responses on questionnaires. Even if the methods are

intrinsically sound, they must be employed more systematically than they have been to date. Interpretation of the survey data must be very cautious at this point.

School Culture Indices. Another approach to the study of alternative schools seeks to identify salient features of the school culture or learning environment. The extensive study of the Berkeley Experimental Schools Project (BESP), for instance, used six "indicators of educational diversity" to determine whether or not the project had succeeded in producing "comprehensive change" in the system: non-graded classrooms, peer teaching, interdisciplinary approach, multi-cultural emphasis, controversial or avant garde subjects, programmed instruction. How these particular items were selected and others rejected was not made clear. Of the twenty-three programs in BESP, twelve had two or fewer of the six indicators, and eleven had three or more. Diversity of innovations increased during the first two years of the project and then declined (Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1976).

A classic example of the use of survey techniques for identifying school culture characteristics is a study by Fletcher and Spady (1975). In order to discover how five basic functions of schooling (custody/control, evaluation/certification, instruction, socialization, selection) were manifested in an alternative school, they created a questionnaire which sought respondents' views on organizational climate and classroom environment. The instrument contained no fewer than 406 items. Trickett (1977) used only 90 forced-choice items to compare normative classroom environments in five different kinds of schools (urban, suburban, rural, vocational, and alternative). Both studies propose broad-scale assertions concerning the culture of alternative schools--without observations to substantiate them. Hoaglund et al. (1976) examined elementary alternative schools along such dimensions as teacher preferences for classroom structure, student perceptions of learning environments and classmate behavior, student attitudes, classroom activities and interactions, and parent attitudes. Their study, still underway, seeks to differentiate types of alternative programs.

QUALITATIVE STUDIES

Implicit in my critique of the literature on alternative schools is a call for more extensive studies of a qualitative, ethnographic nature. Claims about school culture must be regarded as tentative when they rest on the measurement of indicators selected solely by outside researchers. There are reputable scientific models for studying the nature of everyday life in schools. A growing body of work on the social organization of classrooms in conventional schools utilizes such methods as participant-observation, open and structured interviewing, and the microanalysis of film or videotape recordings of actual school scenes (cf. Wolcott, 1973; Mehan, 1976; McDermott, 1976; Erickson and Shultz, 1977; Florio, 1978). The approach may be classic Malinowskian ethnography, or what Geertz (1973) calls "thick description," or what

Mahan (1978) labels "constitutive ethnography": studying the process by which participants in a social encounter assemble and produce such social facts of education as "the role of the teacher" or "discussion." The premise in this last approach is that members of an encounter use a body of social knowledge and certain interpretive procedures to generate and maintain social contexts which are to them sensible and orderly. Careful observation and analysis can reveal how members display the social order to each other through their situated behavior. Very little of the work in alternative schools has used this latter approach, or even the more conventional form of ethnography. The qualitative understanding of new schools generated by such studies is, however, substantial and promising.

Perhaps the richest set of writings on alternative schools has been produced by the Center for New Schools in Chicago (CNS). Since the early 1970s, CNS has placed staff members in alternative schools as both consultants and researchers. Using a combination of methods including participant-observation, structured and unstructured interviews, questionnaris, tests and document searches, researchers documented the process by which members of Chicago's High School for Metropolitan Studies (Metro) created a new form of schooling which redefined rules, roles, and resources. Without ignoring measures of inputs and outcomes, they analyzed the structure of behavior in a range of situations, around a range of issues (cf. Johnson, Moore, and Wilson, 1971). One early study focused on the process of decision making, identifying some patterns of participation by various subgroups within the student body. The insight that different types of students construe the school in different ways seems almost a truism but illuminated a good many facets of alternative school functioning. Moreover, the CNS studies showed that "participation" can take a variety of forms.

My own study of a small alternative school in Boston (Moore, 1977, 1978) used both conventional and constitutive ethnographic methods to discover the principles of organization underlying face-to-face interaction in a number of school contexts. I argued that students and teachers from very diverse backgrounds showed a remarkable ability to invent new forms of schooling: using new kinds of learning resources both inside and outside the building, alterning traditional role definitions, and breaking down common divisions between racial and residential student groups. I also suggested that a problem in this school (and probably many others) was the ambiguity of many social contexts: Participants often used vague or contradictory definitions of situational roles and behavior, and as a result interaction demanded a good deal of work. Ambiguity is a coin with two sides. On the one hand, it allows for creativity, experimentation and freedom; on the other, it sometimes leaves people confused and frustrated. The continual strain of redefining roles, inventing new social forms, and interpreting novel behavior is an important factor in the high rate of teacher "burn-out" in alternative schools, and is reflected in the wild fluctuation of morale and participation among students.

The ethnographic approach is neither easy nor flawless. Stephen Wilson (1974), a member of the CNS staff, reports candidly on the problems and benefits of the qualitative study of a school in Cleveland. The mismatch between evaluation and ethnography, the members' demands for premature feedback, and the high cost of the method in both money and time are but a few of the drawbacks in ethnography. Still, Wilson maintains, the rewards are great, and they help both researchers and participants understand the schools considerably better. Many more such qualitative studies of alternative schools are needed. General questions of social order and more specific issues of decision making, instructional methods, student-teacher interaction, and innovative contexts for learning demand careful observation of members' actual situated behavior, not just measures of outcomes or surveys of attitudes.

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AND STUDENT DIVERSITY

One crucial issue remaining to be considered is the proposition that alternative schools represent a response to student population diversity. The term diversity might be used to refer to any of a number of student characteristics, some more clearly defined than others: learning styles, aptitude, academic and vocational interests, ethnicity or race. To what extent might it be said that alternative schools accommodate these types of diversity?

The rhetoric of the early alternative schools movement emphasized the needs of individual students and criticized the tendency of conventional schools to force children into a single educational mold (cf. Graubard, 1972). That philosophy was realized through many pedagogical means: small classes, individualized instruction, self-pacing, student participation in course design, smorgasbord curricula. In that sense, diversity of learning styles was at least acknowledged and accommodated in theory. Whether alternative school staffs, low in number and limited in resources, could actually provide appropriate learning opportunities for each individual student is another matter. The state of the art of assessing children's educational needs still falls short of providing precisely the right formula for everyone. Nonetheless, the steady commitment of alternative schools as institutions adjusting to differences in learning styles signals a change in educational priorities.

Similarly, many alternative school teachers struggle with the diversity of aptitude among their students. Being opposed to ability tracking, teachers must find or invent strategies and materials which meet the needs of a tremendous range of children. I taught American studies in a class where some students could barely read and others were ready for graduate work. The relatively small size

of the group helped me to relate directly to individual students and to find approaches right for them, but the problem was never completely resolved. Inevitably there were some left behind and others bored. While there are some alternative schools geared toward students with roughly similar aptitudes, many continue to be committed to heterogeneous grouping. By concentrating on the process of inquiry rather than the mastery of testable facts or skills, experimental schools can accommodate a greater diversity of aptitudes without neglecting individual needs. More must be learned about this issue.

Depending on the type of alternative school a student attends, his or her vocational and academic interests may be more or less clearly met. In many smorgasbord schools, teachers try hard to discover opportunities outside the school for students who want them; and the very nature of the curriculum validates the diversity in academic interests. Some courses may focus on vocational options for people with varying educational backgrounds. Experience-Based Career Education, as a different model, explicitly recognizes and encourages diverse occupational interests.

The issue of ethnic and racial diversity poses a considerably more thorny problem. Certain types of alternatives, such as the magnet programs in Boston and many other cities, were originated specifically to encourage voluntary desegregation of the schools. While it is impossible to measure the precise effects of such programs on the choices parents make for their children, statistics suggest that the student bodies of those schools reflect a better racial balance than the average. Both the Alternative Schools Project in Philadelphia (ASP) and the LAB School of Boston, the two programs I know best, were created at least in part as experiments in cross-district integration. They brought together students from the city and the suburbs. Many other alternative schools across the country claim to break down patterns of ethnic and racial isolation. In that sense, then, one can safely say that alternative schools are in fact a response to student population diversity.

Bringing students together in a single program, however, is not necessarily the same as meeting their different needs. Very little research examines the differential performance by and treatment of students from different backgrounds. One Center for New Schools study (Johnson, Moore, and Wilson, 1972) describes the various student cliques found at Metro High School. Equalitarian rhetoric notwithstanding, students in the school demonstrated very different interaction styles: There were the radical-hippie types, the school-alienated gang types, and several others. In my school in Philadelphia, racial tension surfaced only rarely, but black city students and white suburban students tended to keep to themselves. Interaction across racial and residential lines at the LAB School, on the other hand, was frequent and friendly. Perhaps the

difference between the two lay in the distribution and the size of the respective student bodies: LAB was considerably smaller, and the racial balance was much closer to 1:1. One way or another, alternative school people must consider what happens once people from different backgrounds come together.

In part, the differences may assume curricular form. Again, little research exists to inform this issue. I am not prepared to extrapolate from my own experience to posit broad generalizations, but the details are intriguing. In both ASP and LAB, black students and white students appeared to favor different kinds of learning modes. Whites tended to want the more experimental, unusual, flexible courses. Blacks, interestingly, sought out more traditional, academic offerings and expected more "teacherly" behavior from their instructors. Several black students in each school told me that they had enrolled in the alternative program "to get a better education," by which they meant harder work, more reading and writing, better chance to get into college. The fact that they often did not do any more work than white students is another matter: What is significant here is the nature of the symbolic differences in the definitions of school. The staffs of the two schools never succeeded in adjusting the curriculum to accommodate both sets of definitions. In that sense, then, alternative schools may fall short as a response to student population diversity.

In some districts, schools have been established which seek to attract students of a single ethnic or racial background. Such New York "street academies" as Harlem Prep and Harambee Prep served almost exclusively black populations and geared much of their coursework and counseling toward black identity, pride, and history. In Berkeley, three schools in the BESP system focused on specific groups: Black House and United Nations West were all-black, and Casa de la Raza served Chicanos. According to the study of BESP by the Institute for Scientific Analysis (ISA) (1976: 5), Black House maintained that

> Students from ethnic minorities, which have been historically oppressed, discriminated against and consigned to an inferior status by the dominant majority, could be better motivated to achieve their educational potential in a setting that was informed with the culture, historical experience and contemporary reality of their ethnic group. Such a setting, it was argued, would cultivate ethnic pride and self-esteem among the students. ... It was argued further that autonomy for the given ethnic group was best designed to create such a setting.

Here is the rub: While the ISA evaluation team regarded these three schools as among the most innovative in the BESP system, the United States Office of Civil Rights ordered them closed for violations of laws against racial separatism.

The dilemma of student diversity continues to plague alternative schools. On the one hand, schools may attempt to recognize diversity by consciously attracting students from many ethnic and racial groups -- but no one has yet invented a unitary school program which accommodates differences in learning styles and academic needs of different populations. On the other hand, schools may focus on one specific ethnic or racial group, seeking to create a program uniquely suited to those students' styles and needs -- but that form of separatism may fly in the face of the movement toward school integration advanced so painfully over the last twenty-five years. The basic questions are whether we can learn to value and adjust to diversity within the school, bringing together different kinds of students without making them become identical; and whether we can learn to accept and enhance diversity at the institutional level, offering different schools for different people without implying that one type is "better" than another. The choices are not mutually exclusive.

SUMMARY AND PROGNOSIS

The state of the art in alternative schools is complex, fragmentary and in many ways unknown. No comprehensive historical study traces the recent wave of experimental schools, public or private, perhaps because there is no unitary movement to be found. Even the research positing stages of development for individual schools (cf. Deal, 1975; Ray, 1976) must be regarded as highly tentative until the ideas are tested on many more schools. What can be said, all these cautions aside, about the present status of the alternative school movement?

The free schools so popular seven or eight years ago still exist -- at least some of them (cf. New Schools Exchange; Applesauce). Some are thriving, but by and large they are as isolated from one another and as fragile as ever. They continue to struggle for day-to-day survival, in both a financial and a spiritual sense. Some have been absorbed by the public school system, but many remain autonomous; some manage an uneasy balance between the two, receiving substantial grants from various state and federal sources and yet insistently remaining politically distinct. To date, no one can say with any certainty why some schools survive and others collapse.

Within the public system, alternative schools assume more different forms than they did eight years ago. From modified elementary classrooms to independent schools-without-walls at the secondary level, each form serves different students using different approaches. Each type has its advocates and detractors. If surveys by the Center for Options in Public Education and the National Alternative Schools Program are accurate, more and more school districts across the country offer one or another type of experimental, innovative education. That fact suggests that the future is relatively good for alternatives.

The picture is not entirely rosy. In Philadelphia, where fully 102 separate programs were listed in the 1977 catalog of the Alternative Programs Office, a massive budget deficit resulted in the elimination of all but thirty-five for the 1977-78 year -- and the Alternative Programs Office itself was absorbed by External Operations. Interestingly, such back-to-basics projects as Academics Plus were retained under the auspices of the Curriculum Department and were not categorized as alternatives at all. What that administrative fact says about the district's position on alternative education is open to interpretation.

In New York City, on the other hand, alternative schools seem to be surviving at least as well as the conventional schools. When regular school budgets are cut, alternative schools' are as well, but no more than the rest. One symbol of the level of support from central administration is this fact: Last year's edition of the brochure explaining and describing high schools listed the independent alternative schools in a small-print section in the rear, but the new booklet affords each independent the same full-page format as the conventional high schools. The alternatives are growing in enrollment and are available in more and more schools. New York alternative schools, that is, appear to be entrenched, at least for the foreseeable future.

Berkeley has problems, Minneapolis is thriving; Philadelphia is cutting back, but Grand Rapids is expanding. In different localities, different personalities and conditions place alternative schools in different spots. The primary argument of this paper has been that one cannot generalize about the success or failure of alternative school programs on the basis of what is currently known about them. The trend nationwide seems to be toward offering more options for students at all levels, and that at least is a positive sign. As the questions and methods used in analyzing alternative education are progressively refined, practice may improve. Knowing more about the nature of various processes, strategies, and formats, educators will come closer to the essential goal of the alternative school movement: to provide for each child a stimulating, nurturant, and humane environment for learning and growing.

Acknowledgments

My debts in the preparation of this paper number in the hundreds and stretch back six years. I must give special mention, however, to several people: to Gisha Berkowitz, director of the Alternative Schools Project in Pennsylvania, for stimulating my thoughts as a teacher; to Frederick Erickson, my adviser at Harvard, for encouraging my thoughts as a scholar; and to Oswald Giulii, coordinator of alternative programs in Philadelphia, Harold Genkin, coordinator of alternative programs in New York, Seth Wohl, chief researcher of alternative programs for New York, and Frederick Koury, principal of the City-As-School, for giving me their valuable time to explain programs and issues.

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